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ABSTRACT

Feedback has emerged in the literature as a means to facilitate both the learning proccess and teaching performance. The context of constructive, systematic feedback includes evaluation as an important element in the process of decision making for teaching. Teaching and learning function as a whole to achieve outcomes from which specific information is collected. Information for students comes from sources such as their performance on tests, assignments, and projects, and in class during instruction. The focus of feedback for learning should address at least two dimensions: content mastery, and tools or skills for learning. The feedback process for learning involves at least eight steps that include expectations, criteria, student progress, students' accomplishments and strengths, areas needing further study or practice, recognition of students' efforts, suggestions about learning activities, and encouragement. Sources of feedback for teaching, which should be gathered on an ongoing basis, are students, peers, principals, and parents. Actions to facilitate feedback for teaching involve: setting a climate of trust; clarifying expectations; gathering significant information; reviewing and acknowledging each comment; adjusting teaching as needed; and evaluating effectiveness of modifications. Constructive feedback is relevant, immediate, factual, helpful, confidential, respectful, tailored, and encouraging. Exhibits provide two diagrams: a decision-making model for teaching and learning, and a systematic feedback process. (LL)

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Constructive Feedback: A Key to Successful Teaching and Learning

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Constructive Feedback: A Key to Successful Teaching and Learning

A review of related literature reveals that feedback has emerged as a means to facilitate the learning process as well as teaching performance.[1] Additionally, some argue that "students of teachers who emphasize teaching behaviors such as praise and encouragement tend to learn more than students of teachers who emphasize criticism and punishment",[2] and that teachers who "check student's progress regularly and adjust instruction accordingly" are using effective teaching strategies. Similarly, it has been reported that teachers are interested in feedback which provides recognition of effective teaching as well as identifies areas of need in order to achieve student success.[3] Consequently, it seems apparent that teachers, as well as those who provide instructional support, need to develop a clear understanding of the characteristics and potential of feedback for instructional effectiveness purposes.

Described here is a systematic feedback process which may lead not only to effective teaching, but more importantly to successful learning. An evaluation frame of reference is presented, some feedback viewpoints are highlighted, feedback for learning and feedback for teaching are distinguished, some characteristics of constructive feedback are discussed, and some suggestions are presented.

Evaluation of instruction

In order to understand the true potential of feedback, it is necessary to place it in the context of a planning paradigm which includes evaluation as a connecting dimension in the process of decision-making for teaching. A decision making process for teaching includes at least five dimensions; as it can be observed in Exhibit 1. These are purposes and objectives, curriculum, modes of instruction, learning outcomes, and evaluation. 4 Each of these dimensions has distinctive characteristics which are outlined below:

Purposes and Objectives. Purpose refers to a general statement which delineates the scope and nature of learning, and from which instructional objectives will be derived. Instructional objectives refer to specific statements about what the student will be able to do once the teaching- learning process is completed.

Curriculum. Curriculum which refers to the content of instruction includes a description of the specific content (facts, concepts, generalizations, laws, norms, and values) and the organization of the content into specific arrangements such as courses, units, lessons, and others.

Instructional Strategies. Instructional strategies include specific techniques for instruction. Some examples are direct teaching, discovery method, collaborative learning, and the like. A second component of instructional strategies refers to the grouping of students; i.e., small groups, pairs, large classes, etc.

Learning Outcomes. Learning outcomes refer to specific learning results. Some examples are fund of knowledge, intellectual operations, cognitive structure, skills and values.

Evaluation System. Provides information about the actual outcomes of teaching and learning. That is, it generates feedback. Evaluation, then, is a linkage component which allows one to recycle the decision-making process and leads to future planning. 5

Insert Exhibit 1 about here

In general, evaluation refers to the act of appraising or valuing the nature, character, quality, or status, of something. For the purpose at hand, evaluation is defined as a process to collect information to determine whether or not successful teaching and learning has occurred. Data generated through such a process may be used to provide specific information to teachers and students concerning their performance and achievement, with specific purposes in mind.

According to the purpose of evaluations, three types can be distinguished:

Diagnostic: To determine the presence, or absence, of knowledge, experiences, skills, and values.

Formative: To determine the need for adjustment, modification, or additional study; and

Summative: To determine the overall success of teaching and learning.[6]

It seems apparent that regardless of purpose one main attribute of evaluation is to provide relevant information to those engaged in the teaching-learning process in regard to their performance, that is, to provide feedback to teachers and students so that modifications and adjustments can be made.

Feedback Viewpoints

According to the thesaurus, feedback refers to "the return to the input of a part of the output of a system, or process." It is also associated with a "response, especially to one in authority about an activity." More specifically, feedback has been conceptualized from three perspectives: the student, the teacher, and the teaching-learning process. For instance, Bloom suggests that "feedback can reveal errors in learning shortly after they occur . . . a self-correcting system so that errors made at one time can be corrected before they are compounded with later errors".[7] Similarly, Carlson argues that feedback is "authoritative information students receive that will reinforce or modify responses to instruction and guide them more efficiently in attaining the goals of the course."[8] More recently, feedback has been defined as a process for "collecting information about students' performance, their familiarity with the type of test or assessment method, and their background knowledge."[9]

From the teacher's perspective, feedback is considered as "information provided to instructors with the intent of acknowledging effective teaching practices and bringing about agreement on changes or providing suggestions if needed."[10] Teachers also see feedback as a means to acknowledge effective teaching practices, to identify areas of need, and to provide suggestions for improvement.[11]

In a more global perspective, feedback is contemplated as an "essential part of the teaching and learning process." 12 Thus, feedback has been recognized as a tool to enhance teaching and learning.

Most of these perspectives emphasize the informative nature of feedback. Given its foundation, it is apparent that feedback follows a systematic process. A process in which teaching and learning function as a whole that together carry out the instructional process in order to achieve learning outcomes, from which specific information is collected for teaching and learning. Thus, feedback should be regular, orderly, and methodical. Exhibit 2 illustrates this systematic feedback process.

Insert Exhibit 2 about here

Feedback for Learning

The information provided to students to guide their learning efforts can come from a variety of sources. Some examples include student performance on tests, students' assignments, projects, and performance in class during instruction. The focus of feedback for learning should address at least two dimensions: content mastery and tools for learning, or study skills. Therefore, teachers are in a better position to provide constructive feedback for learning. Thus teachers need to be aware of students' characteristics, learning styles, preferred study techniques and limitations as well.

The feedback process for learning involves at least the following steps:

1. Provide clear expectations about student learning and performance.
2. Explain specific criteria to judge students' achievement.
3. Collect pertinent information about student progress.
4. Acknowledge accomplishments and students' strengths.
5. Identify areas which need further study or additional practice.
6. Recognize students' efforts towards achievement of goals and objectives.
7. Suggest learning activities, learning tools, and study techniques for additional study.
8. Encourage students to increase efforts.

Feedback for Teaching

Information concerning teaching practices can come from at least four sources: students, peers, principals, and parents. It can focus on content relevance and delivery modes or teaching strategies, as well as on the teacher-student interaction during instruction. Regardless of the source and focus, feedback for teaching needs to be gathered on a permanent basis. In order to facilitate feedback for teaching, teachers may follow the next steps:

1. Set a climate of trust and respect.
2. Clarify expectations of performance.
3. Gather significant information from students and others; i.e., ask questions about the class, request written comments, place a suggestion box in a convenient location in the classroom, etc.
4. Review each comment or piece of information and acknowledge it.
5. Adjust teaching as needed by introducing pertinent modifications or using new strategies.
6. Evaluate effectiveness of modifications.

Characteristics of Feedback

As a systematic process to facilitate successful teaching and learning, constructive feedback has the following distinguishing characteristics.

Relevant: Addresses student and teacher specific achievements, needs, and interests as well as specific learning and teaching behaviors

Immediate: Provided as soon as information about student and teacher performance is available

Factual: Based on actual student achievement (performance on a test, assignment, or project) and teacher's instructional behaviors

Helpful: Provides suggestions for improvement of teaching and learning

Confidential: Given directly to student or teacher without an intermediary

Respectful: of student's and teacher's integrity and needs

Tailored: Designed to meet individual student or teacher's specific needs and circumstances

Encouraging: Motivates student and teacher to continue and to increase teaching and learning efforts[13]

Concluding Remarks

It seems apparent that feedback which is constructive and meaningful may lead to successful teaching and learning, as well as to personal satisfaction. Feedback needs to be systematically provided to teachers and students across levels of schooling.

Feedback should be relevant, timely, factual, helpful, confidential, respectful, tailored to specific needs, and encouraging. Additionally, those who are in a position to provide support to teachers and students may increase the effectiveness of feedback by:

•Reducing the inherent threat and negative reactions associated with evaluation of performance,

•Keeping comments as impersonal as possible and focusing on the behavior,

•Collecting descriptive data while observing actual performance,

•Offering support and optimism that students can develop their unique potential,

•Establishing regular mechanisms to offer feedback and using levels or point scales to rate performance,

•Using written statements highlighting achievements and providing encouragement,

•Giving specific suggestions and praising both teacher performance and student achievements.

Teachers and students who receive relevant information concerning their performance or achievements are more likely to be successful as they engage in the teaching-learning process. Thus, it is important that feedback be provided in a systematic way.

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Exhibit 1

A Decision-Making Model for Teaching and Learning

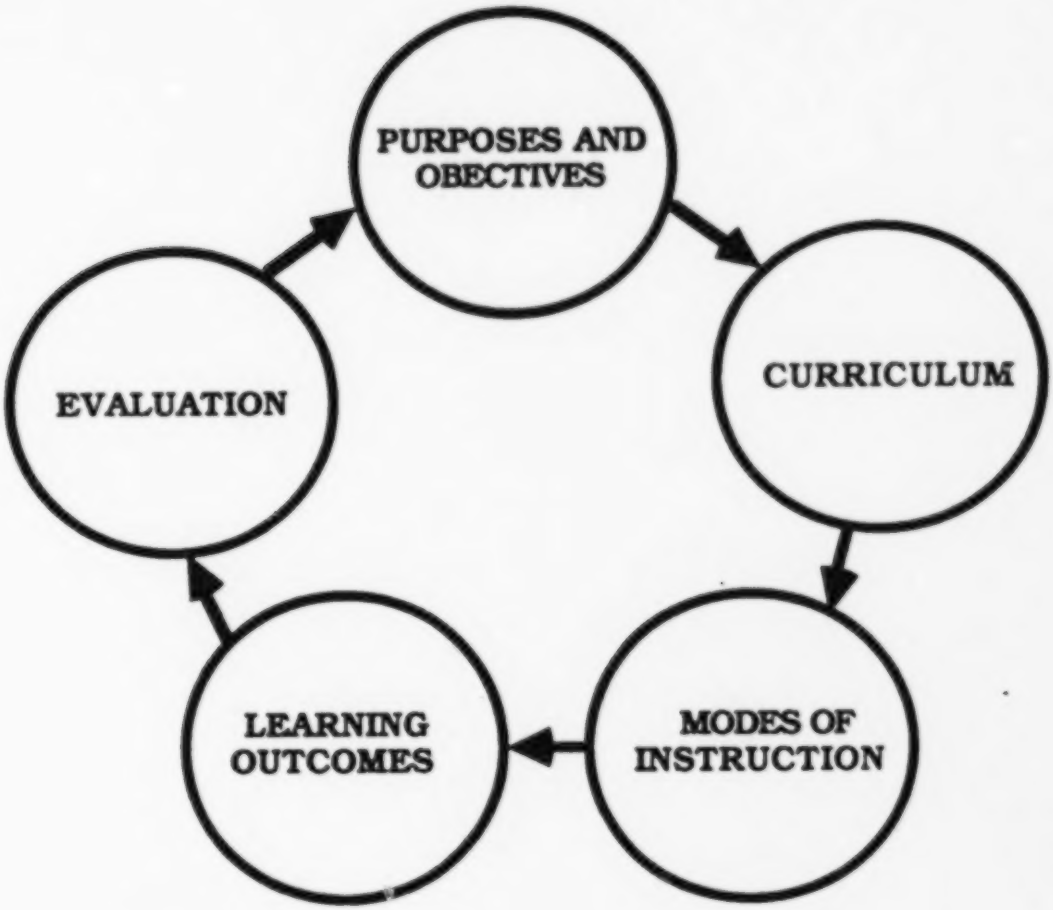

Exhibit 2

A Systematic Feedback Process